

# Uyghur Nationalism and China

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2010/12/02/uyghur-nationalism-and-china/>

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Since the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Mao Zedong in 1949, Xinjiang Autonomous Region has been an area of violent contention between its native ethnic group, the Uyghur's, and the rest of the Han Chinese population. Policy changes throughout the history of the PRC have in turn resulted in differing attitudes toward the government, culminating in an uneasy relationship between Uyghur's, Han Chinese native to Xinjiang and the PRC representatives placed there by the government. What this essay seeks to explore is how PRC policy has changed Uyghur thought with respect three key themes: the increase of religious rights for Uyghur's, increased political autonomy for Uyghur's within Xinjiang province, or indeed complete independence from China and the establishment of a sovereign Uyghur state. How the Uyghur population conceptualises its struggle is vital for the continued existence of the movement. Is the Uyghur movement a drive for human rights? A fight for increased autonomy? Or indeed a full blown separatist insurgency? On the other hand, how the PRC views the 'Uyghur problem' will have a direct bearing on the way it handles problems within Xinjiang in the future. Whether or not the Uyghur's are seen as an ethnic group campaigning for better human rights, a political group campaigning for increased autonomy or a terrorist group fighting for a Uyghur state will illicit different responses from the Chinese government.

The history of Uyghur's rights within Xinjiang has always been a vicious to and fro of radical Chinese domestic politics. Whichever current ideology has prevailed due to the systematic in-fighting of the CCP has had a dramatic effect on how the Uyghur's have been treated. During the Cultural Revolution, Muslims became the focus of anti-religious and anti-ethnic nationalism critiques, leading to widespread persecutions, mosque closings and at least one massacre[1]. As Mao's ideas of Chinese national identity and constant revolution took hold, the Uyghur people were on the receiving end of such ideology, paying a heavy price for simply attempting to maintain their cultural and religious identity.

After Mao's death and with the culmination of the Cultural Revolution, conditions for Uyghur's and indeed all Muslim's within China showed a marked improvement, with the government aligning with Muslim wishes on more than one occasion. For example, in the late 80's, a Chinese children's book was published that portrayed Muslim's derogatorily, especially the belief that followers of Islam should not eat pork. Also, another book written by two Chinese authors was published entitled 'Sexual Customs' that was said to offend the followers of Islam within China. On both occasions, the government responded quickly, meeting most of the Muslim's demands[2]. The acquiescence of the PRC on these two issues highlighted the changing mantra towards China's Uyghur and Muslim minorities, allowing them more individual and collective religious rights than ever before, listening to their complaints and dealing with them effectively.

Unfortunately for the Uyghur's, the PRC attitude toward freedom of religion once again changed rapidly with the events taking place in the United States on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. With the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers, the global climate toward any form of religious or ethnic divide within a nation state changed markedly. Muslims professing to be enemies of America, Chechen rebels in the Russian Federation and Ethnic Uyghur's within China were all categorised as troublemakers, hell bent on destroying nation state unity. Whether or not (and I am inclined to believe not) this was fact, great power interests had aligned, and this had allowed the three governments to pursue even more authoritarian and drastic measures to ensure 'national security'. Rights for Uyghur's decreased once again, with the levelling of Uyghur settlements in Kashgar, the forced movement of populations into specially

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designated accommodation, and decreased religious and linguistic freedoms for minors upon entering education. With the current crackdown on Uighur Muslims and ongoing savagery toward Falun Gong practitioners, China remains one of the world's most repressive governments[3]. The reactionary measures taken by the great power's since the advent of the 'War on Terror' have shown no sign of shifting back to the pre 9/11 measures, and if anything have emboldened the political elite within China to believe that they can act with impunity under this misappropriated guise. The hope for the now Uyghur minority within Xinjiang and indeed Muslim's across the breadth of China is this; as attitudes towards Islam and minorities within Chinese borders have changed frequently in the past, so can they in the future. For the PRC, with a change in leadership planned in the next few years, political wrangling may get in the way of official policy and could culminate in three possible outcomes. Increased rights for Uyghur's, decreased rights for Uyghur's, or a maintenance of the status quo. How far the new leadership will want to stray from the current mantra of 'Harmonious Society' will have a direct bearing on this decision.

While rights given by Chinese authorities are one goal pursued by ethnic Uyghur's, greater political and economic autonomy are quite another. The full name of the region's territorial unit, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, suggests that Uyghur's— the largest non-Han population in Xinjiang—largely govern themselves[4]. However the reality within Xinjiang seems far away from the idealistic title of the province, where it comes to governance, Beijing has allowed Uyghur's almost no independence of action[5]. Firstly, the centralised CCP government has suppressed any form of Uyghur political elite from allying together within Xinjiang province, keeping a strict control on the ability of a unified Uyghur political consciousness to form. Secondly, ever since the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949 and the re-established control of Xinjiang, Xinjiang has been appointed a governor of Han Chinese ethnicity. For the PRC to profess that the province has any degree of autonomy is a shallow and debunked theory due to this fact. How can the Uyghur people be said to have autonomy, where in their whole history within the PRC they have never been allowed to be led by one of their own?

Beijing has substituted an official line that most Uyghur's are quite satisfied with the way Xinjiang is ruled[6] whereas in reality, the government is viewed in a very dim light by the majority of ethnic Uyghur's. Apart from the political reasons already mentioned, one of the primary sources of discord is actually an economic problem. With China rising on the world stage, many Uyghur's have (rightly, in my opinion) expected their standard of living to have risen and greater economic opportunities to have presented themselves within Xinjiang. In reality, Beijing still wields considerable economic influence in Xinjiang, abetted by the region's disproportionate concentration of state enterprises[7]. This fact gives an interesting insight to the actual degree of autonomy permitted to Uyghur's in Xinjiang. With economic changes occurring rapidly since Deng Xiaoping's market reforms in the early nineties, China has seen a huge decrease in state owned companies and a large growth in privately owned enterprises; not so in Xinjiang. The reasoning for this is so the CCP can keep an even tighter stranglehold on the economic growth (and relative power of its citizens) as to retain an even tighter political grip upon the province. The CCP does not see Xinjiang as a cultural homeland for ethnic Uyghur's, it is seen as a rich in resources province of China and the gateway to even more Oil and Natural Gas deposits in Central Asia. Herein lies the problem for Uyghur's that want a greater degree of political autonomy from CCP rule. With Xinjiang being such an important province, crucial to the economic growth of the PRC and with it being a gateway to lucrative energy deals in Central Asia and the Caucasus, the CCP is loath to relinquish any degree of political authority. One middle ground for the two parties' could be a softening of religious restrictions; this way the Uyghur population would be placated to a certain degree and the CCP would not have to give in to any overtly political demands. Though this sort of policy seems wishful to say the least in the current climate, it must be remembered that the attitudes of the ruling party toward the Uyghur's has changed in the past, and the fact that rapid political changes occur frequently throughout the history of authoritarian regimes, there is at least a glimmer of hope that change will come in the future. That said, hopes for greater political autonomy (specifically a Uyghur governor of Xinjiang) remain extremely doubtful.

For the Uyghur's that completely reject PRC authority, secession is seen as the only possible option. These secessionists fall into two distinct categories. There are ethnic Uyghur secessionists, who advocate a sovereign state based upon Uyghur ethnicity. And there are religious Uyghur secessionists, who also advocate a sovereign nation state, with all the political rights attributed to it, but in respect to an independent *Muslim* state. These are the groups that the PRC crackdown and intervention within Xinjiang have been centred upon. They have been labelled 'separatists' by the government and some groups such as the East Turkestan Independence Movement are known

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as terrorist organisations. For a separatist, the crime that is levelled at their efforts is known as 'splitism' – attempting to split the Chinese state. Or put more eloquently – “It refers to a reactionary trend of social thought that is aimed at creating national division and undermining the unification of the motherland...”[8]. An interesting note is that the phrase 'splitism' is one solely translated into the English tongue recently for explaining this phenomenon. Could this indeed be another attempt by the PRC to draw yet more parallels with the struggles with terrorism of its international 'allies' in the 'War on Terror'? The current line within the CCP has been to cluster such Uyghur secessionist activities together with those of groups in Tibet and Taiwan, labelling them as the same struggle, and the same threat to Chinese sovereignty. This is not the case. The PRC has not produced evidence to support allegations of this alliance[9]. As with any secessionist movement, it has its own individual and unique characteristics which define its struggle.

For a start, its motivations differ from those of Tibetans or Taiwanese. The Uyghur's are one of the few segments' of Turkic ethnicity who have not attained the right to govern as a nation-state. The Soviet breakup indicates that the independence of the Central Asian states left a strong impression among Uyghur's[10]. States such as Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan all gained independence with the Soviet dissolution, and as these peoples are viewed by Uyghur's as sharing a common ethnicity, it gives rise to a body of thought that can only lead to the dangerous road of separatism and independence from China. Additionally, the Uyghur view of the government and its practices not only engenders spite towards the Han population, but instils an active call for an independence movement. Uyghur's view CCP governance as exploitative, even imperial[11]. Oil and Gas exploration in the area has increased dramatically with China's growing thirst for energy to fuel its growth, an act ethnic Uyghur's see as resource stripping, and something akin to colonial practices by the government. This highlights a key feature in the Uyghur collective psyche. The Uyghur's, however fragmented as a political elite, still see Xinjiang as their own, their land, and not merely one of China's many provinces. This, while not actively breathing life into a fresh, coherent independence movement, demonstrates that the apathetic side of the Uyghur population would indeed support such a movement if it gained enough strength. No independence movement has ever succeeded without the backing of the common man. This may be a small comfort to the oppressed Uyghur's in Xinjiang, but to have the knowledge that the masses would indeed be unified in a single goal should the event that triggers revolution arise, should interest the die-hard supporters of such a cause.

In general, we can characterise present-day Uyghur ethno-political thought in four ways: apathist, assimilationist, autonomist and separatist[12]. The great majority of Uyghur's slot into the first category, there are a small number of the second. The majority of politically active Uyghur's fit into the third, and the most radical the fourth. To even be active in politics within Xinjiang is a dangerous business, and it can not be understated that the great majority of Uyghur's are apathist. The problem occurs for these people when a terrorist attack happens; the common Uyghur in the street shares the same enforced government crackdown than the actual perpetrators of the attack. It is much easier for the PRC to categorise the Uyghur's collectively as a problem, and to take significant policy measures to counter-balance that problem. For example, heavy Han immigration into the region[13], a policy enacted for decades, has affected the lives of all the Uyghur's living in Xinjiang, not solely the politically active and those willing to commit violent acts to bring attention to the cause. This in turn disillusiones the majority of the populace against PRC rule and causes more people (especially the youth) to turn to more radical ways of achieving political objectives.

From the PRC point of view, the significance of the actions of Uyghur separatists seems to rise and fall depending on the global political and indeed economic climate. The Chinese government emphasises... the general threat of Uyghur separatism when those emphases serve the state's interests[14]. For example, when lobbying to attract infrastructural energy investment to Xinjiang province, the PRC will downplay such activities and make assurances that the situation is calm and that the Uyghur's are content with their lives in Xinjiang. Though when the PRC wants to profess the image of a loyal ally to the U.S in accordance to its 'War on Terror' and its views towards Islamic Fundamentalism, Uyghur activity is overstated, with portrayals of terrorism and separatism in the state media informing the populace that these practices are rife across the breadth of Xinjiang. The Uyghur's are being used as a policy tool in PRC diplomacy with the United States in this respect. And Xinjiang province is being used as a resource well for China's ever expanding thirst for natural resources. On both counts, the Uyghur people and their land are being used, with little or no benefit to themselves. In this harsh geo-political climate, it is hard to make recommendations as to a course of action for Uyghur's in Xinjiang, though I believe a move away from political goals

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and a move toward the attainment of purely religious goals may serve their cause in the near future. This would help them to preserve their cultural identity and also benefit the PRC, as in exchange for granting such religious concessions, the political climate of separatism would be stymied. These are meagre gains for the Uyghur people, yet the only realistic ones I can see them attaining anytime in the near future.

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